

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 18242

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IN
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADERS MEET TO PREPARE FOR "DIALOGUE" WITH
THE PRIME MINISTER

1. LEADERS OF THE MAIN NON-COMMUNIST OPPOSITION PARTIES MET
IN DELHI DEC 15-17 TO PREPARE THE GROUND FOR A POSSIBLE
"DIALOGUE" WITH MRS. GANDHI. THE FIRST DAY OF TALKS WERE HELD
AT THE SUGGESTION OF THE DMK, WHILE THE SUSEQUENT DIS-
CUSSIONS WERE INITIATED BY H.M. PATEL, THE BLD MP WHO LEADS
THE "JANATA FRONT" IN THE LOK SABHA. INDEED, THE DEC 15
TALKS WERE HELD AT THE DELHI RESIDENCE OF ERA SEZHIYAN,
LEADER OF THE DMK GROUP IN THE LOK SABHA, AND THE VENUE
THEN SHIFTED TO THE HOME OF H.M. PATEL.

2. PARTICIPANTS IN THESE DISCUSSIONS CAME FROM THE FOUR
MAJOR NON-COMMUNIST OPPOSITION PARTIES AS WELL AS FROM THE
DMK. SOME INDEPENDENT MP'S SUCH AS KRISHAN KANT ALSO
ATTENDED. AN EARLIER REPORT THAT THE CPM WOULD ALSO
PARTICIPATE WAS DENIED BY CPM LEADER B.N.S. NAMBOODRIAPAD.
THE DMK WAS REPRESENTED BY M. KARUNANIDHI, DMK PRESIDENT
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AND FORMER TAMIL NADU CHIEF MINISTER, AND SEZHIYAN. THE
CONGRESS (O) GROUP WAS LED BY PARTY PRESIDENT ASHOK MEHTA,
WHILE THE BLD WAS REPRESENTED BY PARTY PRESIDENT CHARAN
SINGH, H.M. PATEL, AND PILOO MODY. N.G. GORAY AND SAMAR GUHA
OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY AND A.B. VAJPAYEE (RELEASED FROM HOUSE
ARREST UNDER MISA LAST WEEK) AND O.P. TYAGI OF THE JANA SANGH

ALSO PARTICIPATED.

3. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE MEETING WAS CALLED IN RESPONSE TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT AT THE GAUHATI AICC SESSION THAT SHE WOULD BE RYD TO TALK WITH OPPOSITION LEADERS IF THEY WOULD CHANGE THEIR WAYS AND ADOPT A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD HER GOVERNMENT. NO PARTY ISSUES WERE DISCUSSED; THE TALKS WERE CONFINED TO A CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES ON WHICH THEY MIGHT INITIATE A DIALOGUE WITH MRS. GANDHI.

4. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, THE DISCUSSIONS WERE "INCONCLUSIVE." HOWEVER, AT THE END OF THE DEC 16 MEETING AT PATEL'S HOUSE, THE OPPOSITION LEADERS RELEASED A RESOLUTION (ALSO SENT UNDER COVER OF A LETTER FROM KARUNANIDHI TO THE PM) IN WHICH THEY PLEDGED THEIR FULL COMMITMENT TO "PEACEFUL AND NON-VIOLENT ACTIVITY" AND TO UPHOLDING THE UNITY, INDEPENDENCE AND INTEGRITY OF THE COUNTRY. THEY REJECTED "EVERY INTERFERENCE FROM FOREIGN SOURCES IN THE AFFAIRS OF OUR PEOPLE." THE OPPOSITION LEADERS STATED THEIR READINESS TO ACCEPT "CERTAIN REASONABLE RESTRAINTS THAT SHOULD APPLY APPROPRIATELY TO THE GOVERNMENT, THE OPPOSITION AND THE PUBLIC." IN THIS CONNECTION, THE OPPOSITION WOULD BE PREPARED TO WORK OUT A "COMPREHENSIVE CODE OF DEMOCRATIC FUNCTIONING," WHICH WOULD BE BINDING ON ALL THREE SECTORS OF PUBLIC LIFE. THEY SAID THEY WOULD CONTINUE TO WORK TOWARD THE RESTORATION OF CIVIL LIBERTIES AND DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS. THE RESOLUTION CONCLUDED BY STATING THE OPPOSITION'S READINESS TO ENGAGE IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT ON NATIONAL ISSUES WITH A VIEW TOWARD THE "NORMALIZATION OF POLITICAL LIFE" IN INDIA.
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5. PILOO MODY TELLS US THAT CHARAN SINGH AND BIJU PATNAIK MET ABOUT TEN DAYS AGO WITH MINSTATE FOR HOME AFFAIRS OM MEHTA AND MOHAMMED YUNUS FOR GENERAL DISCUSSION ON POSSIBLE BASES FOR DIALOGUE AND TOLD THE MEETINGS THIS WEEK THAT THEY WERE MODERATELY ENCOURAGED BY APPROACH FROM MRS. GANDHI'S REPRESENTATIVES. MODY HIMSELF SAID THAT AFTER FEELING MOST DOUBTFUL THAT ANYTHING MIGH EMERGE FROM A DIALOGUE HE WAS BEGINNING TO BE SLIGHTLY ENCOURAGED (EVEN THOUGH HE WAS ARRESTED TWICE MORE WHEN HE VISITED GUJARAT THIS WEEK IN CONNECTION WITH COURT HEARINGS ON TWO PREVIOUS ARRESTS WHEN HE WAS IN GUJARAT AT THE BEGINNING OF DECEMBER). ERA SEZHIYAN TOLD US LATE TODAY THAT THE OPPOSITION FELT IT HAD TO RESPOND IN SOME WAY TO MRS. GANDHI'S GUHATI REMARKS OR APPEAR TOTALLY INFLEXIBLE. HE SAID THAT WHILE ONE COULD ONLY WAIT AND SEE WHAT THE PM'S RESPONSE WOULD BE, HE WAS SOMEWHAT LESS OPTIMISTIC THAN SOME OF HIS COLLEAGUES. THE KEY ACTION, HE SAID,

WHICH THE GOVERNMENT WOULD HAVE TO TAKE WOULD BE TO
OPEN UP THE PRESS AND PUBLIC MEETINGS FOR OPPOSITION
POLITICIANS TO HAVE A MEANS OF ADDRESSING THE PUBLIC ON
THEIR VIEWS. DETAILS RELATING TO RELEASE OF PRISONERS,
ELECTIONS, AND OTHER ASPECTS OF THE EMERGENCY COULD FOLLOW
AND BE WORKED OUT SLOWLY, BUT NOTHING WAS POSSIBLE UNLESS
MRS. GANDHI AND CONGRESS WERE PREPARED TO SEE DEMOCRATIC
DIALOGUE TAKE PLACE IN THE LIGHT OF DAY. THE NEXT STEP
WAS UP TO THE GOVERNMENT. SEZHIYAN SAW LITTLE PROSPECT
FOR ELECTIONS, HOWEVER, UNTIL 1978.

6. COMMENT: THE DISCUSSIONS TO PAVE THE WAY FOR A POSSIBLE
DIALOGUE WITH THE PRIME MINISTER ARE SEPARATE FROM THE EFFORTS
OF THE FOUR PARTIES TO MERGE INTO A UNITED OPPOSITION PARTY.
WHILE THE OPPOSITION IS HOLDING TOGETHER AT THIS POINT, WE DO
NOT EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY THAT MRS. GANDHI IS LOOKING FOR
CRACKS WHICH A DIALOGUE MIGHT OPEN UP IN THEIR RANKS, PARTICULARLY
BETWEEN THE JANA SANGH AND THE OTHER THREE PARTIES, AND BE-
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TWEEN THE DMK AND THE JANATA OPPOSITION.
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